Nixon Alerted To Cover-Up In Watergate

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As early as last December, President Nixon was warned by members of his own staff that presidential aides were deeply involved in the Watergate bugging and a subsequent cover-up, according to highly reliable sources in the executive branch.

On several occasions from last winter to early spring, the President was told that former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and White House counsel John W. Dean III were probably deeply involved in both the illegal electronic surveillance and the coverup, the sources reported.

CHARLES W. COLSON
. . . warned President

On each occasion, the President said he was anxious to learn the truth but maintained that Mitchell and Dean had denied any involvement in the Watergate affair, the sources said. "Give me some evidence," one quoted the President as saying.

Gerald Warren, deputy White House press secretary, said last night that there would be no comment on the contents of The Washington Post story.

The sources, all of them men long considered deeply loyal to the President, said that in January special presidential counsel Charles W. Colson and two other presidential assistants told Mr. Nixon that persons in his administration were obstructing justice and that action should be taken.

JOHN N. MITCHELL
. . . involvement reported

On three separate occasions, the sources said, Colson personally recommended to the President that he get rid of some people. An associate of Colson told The Washington Post an almost identical account yesterday.

This was learned as some of those involved tried to explain their own roles at the expense of others. The statements came in a proliferating gush of self-serving charges and countercharges — some made privately and then denied publicly.

Reached for comment yesterday, Colson denied that he had warned the President, adding that he would not discuss private communications between himself and the President with anyone — including the press, the federal grand jury investigating the Watergate affair, or a Senate investigating committee.

A Colson associate, however, confirmed that Colson had warned the President, but said that Colson would deny it.

According to the associate, Colson's denial was issued for two purposes: to avoid any acknowledgement that the President was forewarned of his aides' involvement in the bugging and cover-up, and fear that Dean might "retaliate" by implicating Colson before the grand jury.

Colson has denied any involvement in the Watergate bugging and last week supplied the prosecution in the case with documentary evidence of a White House cover-up in the case. One independent source described the evidence as self-serving but said it nonetheless is convinc-

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JOHN W. DEAN III
. . . removed from case

WATERGATE, From A1

ing in its allegations that others participated in a cover-up.

The sources said that Colson has gone so far as to tell associates that the President has been betrayed by some of his aides.

There was general agreement this weekend among the sources that the President had been urged for months to take action on the Watergate.

One source said that John Ehrlichman, the President's chief domestic adviser, was a leading force in urging the President to intensify efforts to clear up the Watergate. Another source, however, said that Ehrlichman had played no such role until late last month.

It is known that at least one attorney for the President's re-election committee visited Ehrlichman early this month to warn him that the Watergate case was about to explode.

Ehrlichman could not be reached for comment yesterday.

In a related development, White House sources said yesterday that the President had removed his counsel, Dean, from any responsibility in the Watergate investigation about six weeks ago.

This was two weeks before March 26, when the President denied that Dean had any prior knowledge of the Watergate bugging. At that time the President also expressed "absolute and total confidence" in Dean.

Last week this confidence apparently was lacking as White House Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler refused to reiterate the President's earlier statements.

Dean issued a statement last week without approval of his superiors saying that he would not become a "scapegoat" in the Watergate.

Associates of Dean said that Dean is ready to implicate other persons in the case.